

## [I Want to Die in Peace]

[Life Story?]

I WANT TO DIE IN PEACE

A Depression Victim Story

Research by: Mrs. Ada [Radford?]

Augusta

Edited by: Mrs. Leila R. Harris

Supervising Editor

Georgia Writers' Project

Area 7

Mrs. Maude Pate Bridges

306-8th Street

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I WANT TO DIE IN PEACE

I paused for a moment in the doorway of the French Dry Cleaning Company's plant to watch the woman with whom I had an appointment, at work. Mrs. Sarah Harman, owner and operator, was busily inspecting garments prior to delivery.

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While she still maintains a receiving office in the downtown section it is purely utilitarian and in direct contrast to the elaborate reception room of former days.

For 25 years the office of the French Dry Cleaning Company was located on one of Augusta's important corners in the downtown business district. A leather-upholstered merry-go-round was placed just inside of the entrance. The built-in cases were all equipped with mirrored doors and the counters and racks were painted white. Large artificial palms and pot plants added greatly to the attractiveness of the place.

On the outside an electric sign operated with flasher sockets, displayed a life-sized, beautifully dressed woman, that was visible blocks away.

Today the office is located a few doors down the street and she shares it with a tailor in order to cut overhead expenses. Only a few cases and the merry-go-round recall more prosperous days.

Sarah Harman took over the management of the business in the latter part of last year after the death of her husband.

2

"You seem so busy this morning, Mrs. Harman," I said, "Do you think you'll have time for our interview?"

"Well I don't see why not, if you have patience enough to put up with all the interruptions." She answered. And with the air of bravado she affects at all times she continued.

"Just what do you want to know?"

"I would like to know everything about you right from the beginning. Of course," I said playfully, "that would let out how old you are. Do you mind?"

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"Hell, no!" she said with a grin. "I am 61 years old and was born near Stapleton, Georgia. I was the fourth in a family of nine children, but only 3 girls and 1 boy lived to grow up. My fathers, Joseph Franklin White, owned a plantation and ran a two-horse farm."

"Was your father's place near a school?" I questioned.

"Yes and I started at the age of seven. For the ensuing 6 years I averaged about 2 months out of each term. Finally my father engaged a private teacher to come to our home for the next year or two. I can tell you I really studied hard for I wanted to go to the Stapleton High School, and I made the grade.

"No, I didn't get a chance to finish. I had to stop in my senior year and go to work. You see my father had become a cripple and wasn't always able to secure sufficient help."

"Do you mean to tell me you worked on the farm?" I asked dubiously.

3

"Hell, yes! I did everything there was to do on a farm from plowing to building fences. The whole damn burden of the place was on my older sister and myself.

"We bore it as long as we could and after a great deal of persuasion my father agreed to sell the place and move to Augusta. This was in 1898 and in a very short time I got a job at the Augusta Steam Laundry. I stayed there until my marriage two years later.

"We set up housekeeping and I thought all my troubles were over. My husband was a fine cabinet maker and his salary was a small fortune to what I had made. I soon learned, however, that life was an up-hill climb in which you take 2 steps up and fall back one.

"My husband was working for the Augusta lumber Company at the time of our marriage and two years later he was offered a better job at Valdosta, Georgia.

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"Well, we moved and stayed there only one year when he decided to try out a job at Staunton, Georgia. One month of that was quite enough. We went back to Valdosta then we moved to Griffin, and in two more years we moved to Atlanta.

"I thought then that we were settled for life but the damn bug bit him again."

"What bug, Mrs. Harman?" I asked, when I could stop laughing.

"The moving bug, and we were off like a shot for Gadsden, Alabama. One year there and back to Atlanta. In another 18 4 months we hit the road again, this time for Tampa, Florida. In 6 months it was Mobile, Alabama, then Montgomery, back to Atlanta, then Montgomery again.

"By this time I had enough of that dawn moving and I told my husband, 'If you want to move it's all right by me, but I'm staying in Montgomery and going in business.' That was in 1910.

"Then I rented a small store for \$17.50 a month, bought a 16 pound iron, and hired a boy, who had a bicycle, to call for and deliver the garments. I ran an advertisement in the newspaper and opened for business."

"Did you dry clean the garments?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, no! I scrubbed and spotted them."

"And you did the work yourself?"

"Hell, yes! Who else do you think would do it? I had to get started, but it wasn't long before I hired 2 men to work in the plant, and I solicited business.

"Tragedy had stalked into our lives quite sometime before this. Two years after I was married I developed cancer in some of my female organs. An operation was compulsory

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and they were all removed. This brought about a highly nervous condition and my husband and I had anything but a happy life together. I have been told that he told others, I was hell to live with.

“Many were the rumors of other women that came to me. On one occasion I learned that he was going with a woman, whom he met in Allen Park. I went to my lawyer and asked him what I must do about 5 it.

“‘Why not give him a good scare,’ he told me. ‘It might help a lot.’

“So I loaded my pistol with blank cartridges and hid in the park. My mind was fully made up that when I saw them together - I'd fire away.

“I did just that, never dreaming that it would create enough publicity to get in the papers. It was funny, though, the way the papers printed it. They stated that when I shot, the two of them ran and up until the time the paper went to press - they were still running.

“But it didn't stop him. He was from one woman to another, until he met the one in whose house he finally died.

“He picked her up out of the gutter, her and her children, put her in a house and lived outright with her.

“I made him leave home and he threatened my life. For the last 5 years of his life I lived in constant dread of him.

“And now to get back to the newly established business at Montgomery. My husband became interested when it began to look as if I might make a go of it. He gave up his job and came to work with me. We really did a good business and were able to save quits a bit of money.

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"In 1912 I bought the first steam press machine to be used in Montgomery and when we moved to Augusta it was also the first to be used here. That was in 1913."

6

"Why did you leave Montgomery?" I asked. "Which of you was bitten by the moving bug this time?"

"Well this time it was I who wanted to move. My mother and sister were here and after all this was home. After a year of business on Eighth Street near Greene, we moved to the corner and were there for 25 years.

"No, ours wasn't the first dry cleaning plant in Augusta. Stark had a plant which bore the name; 'stark, The Cleaner.' We were known as 'Augusta French Dry Cleaning Company.' Business was very good in Augusta. Our first small cleaning plant was located on lower Fenwick Street and the pressing was done in the office.

"This method was very unsatisfactory, for the steam and dust made the office very untidy. I had a complete mental picture of the kind of a place I wanted and I began to look about for a lot. Soon I found this place. I have a lot 100 x 150 feet and a plant fully equipped for dry cleaning, rug cleaning, and dyeing. All of this was bought in 1921 at a cost of \$25,000.

"We built a \$7,000 home on Hickman Road. It was much easier then to meet the heavy payments on the equipment and the home, than it is to meet a note for \$100.00 due at the bank today. "I never saw so such money as poured into our place then. I had 5 girls and 2 men to wait on the trade. It took all of them for every garment had to be folded and I can tell you, that took a lot of time.

7

"Whoever invented the hanger and bags was a life saver for cleaners, financially, as well as from a time-saving standpoint.

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"I worked 2 tailors besides 15 other men at the plant. My business averaged \$150.00 a day and my income tax was fairly heavy.

"Our first dry cleaning was done with gasoline. It would hold up to [65%?] for a time but after it was distilled the strength would decrease and it could only be used a few times. Then someone discovered a fluid called [solvent?] that could be bought for 14 cents a gallon. This fluid cleaned much better and could be used many times. It came much cheaper when bought in larger quantities.

"Then came the depression! At first I thought it was just one of those things' and that it would soon pass. I figured that after a few months of readjustment business would be normal again. Well I thought wrong, all wrong.

"For awhile my business was fair, but it wasn't long before I had a plenty go worry about. I had to start letting my help go and each week brought a cut. Finally, there was only one girl and myself in the office.

"My husband was running the plant with only 3 men. About this time the other local cleaners got panicky and began to cut prices in order to increase their business. One of them opened a Cash and Carry. I got a large beach umbrella and placed a boy on the curb to catch the cars as they came down Greene Street. In this way my patrons were offered an extra service. They didn't even have to get 8 out of their cars.

"I tell you it was one hell of a fight to make a dollar. Then the bottom fell completely out. It seemed to me that nobody was having any cleaning done. I began to look around for a reason and found that the majority of women were wearing cotton dresses and were washing them.

"I had to have money from somewhere to stay in business. I just couldn't close and lose everything. There was nothing left for me to do but to mortgage my home. But let me tell you, don't you ever do that, it is much better to sell it outright. That damn mortgage has

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really kept me awake nights. Almost every night I see \$3500 and interest, in my sleep. No! don't mortgage anything. Give it away, if necessary, for your peace of mind.

"At one time I had 5 trucks and a nice Buick car for my own use. Now, I have a piece of a truck and I think the damn thing will have to be junked. The garage man just called and said he would overhaul the motor for \$80.00, and fix the wheels for \$15.00 or \$20.00. But the body will still look like hell."

"How is your business now?" I asked. "Are you beginning to feel the recovery that has come to so many?"

"Well, I can't complain. There has been a steady increase in my business for sometime now, for the first time in years I have been able to pay all operating expenses and have even been able to take up some of the back debts, and my taxes that were two years behind.

9

"I'm working hard to got my business back on a paying basis. Then I'm going to sell out, pay off my mortgage, and make my home into 4 apartments.

"I am planning to live in one of them and rent the other three. As you know I don't have chick nor child to leave anything to. I'm alone in the world and I want to get out of this struggle and die in peace.

"Living too high and having too much money to spend was the cause of the depression. People didn't realize that a pay day was coming. I even, expected business to make a quick comeback after a very short recession. If I hadn't I would have been better prepared to meet the crisis.

"What is my opinion of women in business?' She asked sharply.



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"Why, they make much better managers than men. They are much more observant. Men look out for the dollars and women take care of the dimes. In other words men are too confident and never find the leak until the well runs dry.

"Roosevelt is the only president we have had for many years that tried to do anything for the people of our country. Some of the things he tried failed, but at least he tried. All this criticism about the WPA was not brought about by his ideas or is it his fault.

"Politics is responsible for most or it, for much or the money has found its way into the pockets of the politician and the so-called 10 higher ups. Most of the poor devils who needed it, need it still.

"And to go back to my husband and me again. He was on the receiving end at the plant and I stayed downtown at the office. He kept all he took in and I had to meet all operating expenses.

"And this woman that he hauled up out of the gutter! Do you know he bought her an automobile, sent her children to school, and she had \$6000 in a safety deposit box at the bank. No wonder I couldn't take up the mortgage on my home.

"Not long before my husband died she had some dental work done and he stood good for the bill.

"When he died a very short time later, the dentist sent his bill to the French Dry Cleaning Company.

"Well, I took the bill and walked into his office and told him that the Company didn't owe him anything. He said: 'I'll put the matter in the hands of an attorney.'

"As I flounced out of the office I threw back at him:

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“to hell with you! If you haven't any better sense than to do work for a damned crook, you just try to collect it.”